

Appraising *The Whole Motion*: Dickey's Place in Literary History

By Douglas Keesey

The general public will remember James Dickey for *Deliverance*, the best-selling adventure novel that was made into a Burt Reynolds movie, and additional people may read *To the White Sea*, if Brad Pitt stars in the film version to be directed by Joel and Ethan Coen. Folks may recall some of the poems on popular subjects such as football or the moon landing, or some of the more sensationalistic verses on adultery or a woman preaching sex, especially if they heard an increasingly Dionysian Dickey bring these to life during his barnstorming-for-poetry tours. The coffee-table books sold well, though by definition had a relatively short shelf life. The rest of Dickey's life's-work will remain largely unread and unknown.

As for the smaller group of creative writers, academics, and reviewers with a serious interest in literature, the Dickey most fondly remembered is the author of the early poems, the nature lyrics. Review after review of Dickey's *Collected Poems* and the many assessments of his career after his death single out the early poems for high praise, while attacking the middle poems—particularly *The Zodiac*—as an unshapely mess, indiscriminate in diction, egomaniacal in intent, and pandering to the popular taste for religious mysticism, patriotic bombast, or tabloid-style sensationalism. Appreciation of the middle poems does not seem to have gotten much beyond Robert Bly's famously vituperative review of "The Firebombing" in 1967, nor does it show signs of ever doing so. As for the many poems of Dickey's later period, they are simply ignored. Ditto for Dickey's giant novel, *Alnilan*. When Dickey is read in schools—often the place where writers who would otherwise die out are kept alive or even rediscovered—it is *Deliverance* or the early poems that get taught and nothing else. In terms of his mark on literary history, Dickey might as well have stopped writing in the early sixties.

But this is the worst prognosis. It doesn't have to be that way. All three of Dickey's novels are still in print; Wesleyan has published his *Collected Poems* and, recently, his *Selected Poems*; there is a *James Dickey Reader* just out from Simon and Schuster with ample samplings from all genres and periods of Dickey's literary career. The works are out there to be rediscovered and reappraised. Furthermore, there are good guides. Robert Kirschstein has published two collections of essays and two full-length studies of his own to help readers see the value of Dickey's neglected poems; Gordon Van Ness and the other contributors to *The James Dickey Newsletter* continue to make Dickey's case in issue after issue; and Ernest Suarez has written a book-length defense of Dickey against the critics who have reduced his poems to a politically incorrect straw man.

The fact is that Dickey is unlikely to be remembered or to find his proper place in literary history unless the numerous misunderstandings of his work are cleared away and replaced by a more accurate sense of what he actually wrote. This is less a matter of "saving" Dickey from charges of racism or misogyny, or from charges of chaotic form and awkward diction, than it is of recognizing the moral and aesthetic complexity of Dickey's work, which is great precisely because it grapples with the complications of form and ideology, because it works its way through to a moral message beyond simple propaganda or the easy consolations of predictable form. Dickey works and reworks literary forms themselves to yield a meaning more difficult and precise and thus more truly helpful morally, more fully meaningful aesthetically, than most art to which we are accustomed.

As a first step toward appreciating the fuller truth about Dickey, let's explore the notion of "lies." Just published, Henry Hart's mammoth biography of the poet is entitled *James Dickey: The World as a Lie*. As the book jacket promises, Hart "sorts the tall tales from the true ones"; there are forty-six entries listed in the index alone under "Dickey, James-lies." Judging from reviewers' responses so far, this biography seems destined to go down in history as the book that takes Dickey to task, page after page, for telling one lie after another. But there is more to the issue of Dickey's "lies" than this. As Hart does stress, it is Dickey himself who suggested "The World as a Lie" as the title for his biography, in reference to the idea that "we all are poets or artist-gods making or 'making-up' or at least remaking the world" (xv). Ironically, insofar as Hart serves as a debunker of falsehoods, a literalist who holds Dickey strictly accountable to empirical facts, the biographer functions as an anti-poet, unmaking what Dickey has so artfully made. But the matter is even more complex than this, for the conflict between fact and fiction, world and word, is the crucial tension within the poems themselves; their art is itself a making and unmaking of myth, an extension and retraction of a bridge across the gap between imagination and reality.

Another recent book, Christopher Dickey's memoir, *Summer of Deliverance*, is also focused squarely on the question of Dickey's "lies": "He [James Dickey] had always been interested, he liked to say, in 'the creative possibilities of the lie.' He believed the poet 'is not trying to tell the truth, but to make it.' But the lying wasn't limited to the poem. And, in truth, he lied the most about the people who loved him most, until we came to feel he didn't so much know us as imagine us. Which is not to say that he couldn't see us for what we were. He could, sometimes. And his disappointment was impossible to endure" (15). Disappointed in an imperfect reality, Dickey would imagine something better, as if he could thereby make it real. But imagination can become the poet's egotistical imposition upon reality, an intolerance of imperfection and a denial of others' fallibility and one's own. A true reconciliation between self and other, fiction and fact, requires an imagination capacious enough to admit fallibility, to comprehend imperfection as part of a harmonious whole. As these glib abstractions illustrate, this is easier done with words than in the world. It is just such a reconciliation that Christopher Dickey sought with his father in the last months of the poet's life:

the essential difference between myself and my father—I mean, apart from the fact that he was a genius and I'm not—is that he thought that you could imagine life and that that would make everything more interesting and better. And so he made things up all the time. He played incredible mind games, not only in his poetry but in our lives. And I always thought that finding out facts and reporting and getting real, solid information was more surprising than anything I could ever invent. And the book [his memoir], in part, is about exactly that. And it's about him coming from the world of the imagination and me from the world of facts, and trying to find some common ground because we want so desperately to talk to each other and to find each other. (qtd. in Taylor 4)

The finding of a common ground between imagination and facts is the goal of Dickey's entire poetic career, the "whole motion" into which he hoped his early, central, and late "motions" would move and cohere. For Dickey, poetic "lies" are the way to a more comprehensive truth, a way that seemed relatively straightforward at first, but that got increasingly complex as Dickey began to acknowledge the true difficulty of reconciling imagination and reality. Consider the relative easiness of "lies" in an early poem, "In the Mountain Tent" (from *Drowning with Others*):

I am hearing the shape of the rain
 Take the shape of the tent and believe it,
 Laying down all around where I *lie*
 A profound, unspeakable law.
 I obey, and am free-falling slowly

Through the thought-out leaves of the wood
 Into the minds of animals.

I am there in the shining of water
 Like dark, like light, out of Heaven.

[.]

From holes in the ground comes my voice
 In the God-silenced tongue of the beasts.

"I shall rise from the dead," I am saying. (1-9, 30-33; emphasis added)

The speaker's lying form fits rather easily with the shape of the tent and the rain, becoming a conduit for the thoughts of the leaves and the beasts. The unspeakable law is spoken, and it says that the dead shall rise; light will come from dark; and the silent gap between man and beast, man and God, will be bridged by the continuity of nature's ever-renewing cycles. Alliteration ("Lay"-*"lie"*-*"law"*) makes or re-finds a world where man, nature, and God all *"lie"* together, despite their apparent differences. The simplest diction proves the mostly profoundly connected to deeper truths, with lilting meter and shapely lines and stanzas falling into a natural order. It all seems so effortless, a perfectly achieved negative capability, but could it be instead the exact opposite, an epitome of the egotistical sublime? Is reality even encountered here before being remade by the poet's imagination? Are stubborn facts even acknowledged as other before the self transforms them into its own?

These questions are more apparent in retrospect, in the more troubled imaginings of the middle poems, such as "The Firebombing" (from *Buckdancer's Choice*):

Homeowners unite.

All families *lie* together, though some are burned alive.

The others try to feel

For them. Some can, it is often said. (1-4; emphasis added)

Even though the speaker's family and the families on whom he dropped bombs in World War Two will eventually be as one in death, the fact is that the speaker's family now lives, while those Japanese families are dead. Prosaic platitudes about social cohesion ("*Homeowners unite*") and death as the great equalizer run into stubbornly factual qualifiers, pointing out spatio-temporal difference ("*though some are burned alive*"). The poetic statement made so lyrically in the earlier poem about all things lying together is here belied by unredeemed reality; words fail to remake the world.

Nevertheless, the speaker's confession of his inability to imagine the other's death or feel guilty about it—the deconstruction of his own secure home and homey platitudes—itself builds a tenuous connection with the dead. The speaker no longer feels at home with this life and this language. As Ernest Suarez says, the "narrator's use of the word *lie* [*"All families lie together"*] indicates he is looking at his own 'safe' existence in the American suburb and seeing it as an illusion" (74). Dickey has turned on his earlier self-assurance about reality and redemptive

imagination lying down together, exposing it as facile, a lie, but he has done so in the service of a greater "lie," one that encompasses more of the truth:

It is that I can imagine
 At the threshold nothing
 With its ears crackling off
 Like powdery leaves,
 Nothing with children of ashes, nothing not
 Amiable, gentle, well-meaning,
 A little nervous for no
 Reason a little worried a little too loud
 Or too easygoing nothing I haven't lived with
 For twenty years, still nothing not as
 American as I am, and proud of it. (263-73)

The speaker says he can't imagine the other, but then he does, vividly—too vividly, as language visibly strains to conjure an image he knows he never actually saw. He admits that all he really knows are those suburban American souls like himself, but in this very admission a difference opens up between him and them: an irony around the usual words he uses to describe himself ("Amiable, gentle, well-meaning"); a sense of unease over his own too-easy life; a negativity ("nothing not") that doubles back on his earlier life, making him a stranger to himself—and bringing him closer to the strangers, the dead Japanese, he cannot not imagine.

We have arrived at Dickey's middle style. Its tortured syntax, broken and bending lines, and self-destructing platitudes are a far cry from his earlier anapestic rhythms, orderly lines, and translucent diction. Fallen reality now gives the lie to imagination's facile attempts at redemption. Dickey has let the hard facts into his poem, knowing that true transcendence can come only from the fullest admission of flaws, a formal comprehension and working-through of the obstacles to regeneration. In another poem from his middle years, "Falling," Dickey reworks the newspaper account of a flight attendant fallen from a plane, confronting again and again the seemingly meaningless fact of her death, but doing so as a way of acknowledging it as one of the greatest challenges to belief in immortality:

All those who find her impressed
 In the soft loam gone down driven well into the image of her body
 The furrows for miles flowing in upon her where she *lies* very deep
 In her mortal outline in the earth as it is in cloud....can tell nothing
 But that she is there inexplicable unquestionable and remember
 That something broke in them as well and began to live and die more
 When they walked for no reason into their fields to where the whole earth
 Caught her....interrupted her maiden flight told her how to *lie* she cannot
 Turn go away cannot move cannot slide off it and assume another
 Position no sky-diver with any grin could save her hold her in his arms
 Plummet with her unfold above her his wedding silks
 [.....]
 All the known air above her is not giving up quite one
 Breath it is all gone and yet not dead not anywhere else
 Quite *lying* still in the field on her back sensing the smells

Of incessant growth try to lift her a little sight left in the corner
 Of one eye fading seeing something wave *lies* believing
 That she could have made it [. . .] (143-53, 156-61; emphasis added)

If the fact of a body that lies dead is troped by imagination into one that lies believing that it could have lived, this turn from still-life to life still is accomplished, not through the simple turn of phrase I've used here, but by means of considerable difficulty, having to find its way across a veritable obstacle course of hard truths. There are the stubborn facts of the height from which she fell and the depth to which she plunged; the literally unspeakable truth that her death has no meaning or its meaning cannot be explained; the life-denying irony that she died young and unwed, making any imagined nuptial seem merely fanciful, an illusory redemption ("no sky-diver . . . [. . .] unfold above her his wedding silks"). Yet these are the very gaps in meaning—the very distances separating earth and cloud, death and life, maiden and wedding, her and us—that the poem imaginatively bridges, acknowledging the difficulty of doing so by the effort it takes to cross over the holes in meaning. As Dickey has said about the white spaces between phrases in his middle poems, "I envisioned the mind as working by associational and verbal fits and starts, jumps, gaps, and the electric leaps across them" (*Falling* viii):

All the known air above her is not giving up quite one
 Breath it is all gone and yet not dead not anywhere else
 Quite

Paradoxically, it is only through the most profound recognition of her death that Dickey can truly believe in her resurrection: "she lies very deep / In her mortal outline"; "the whole earth /...told her how to lie"; "lying still in the field on her back.../[she] lies believing / That she could have made it."

A late poem, "Daybreak" (from *The Eagle's Mile*), shows Dickey in his final phase, the style he chose in the end to complete his working-through of the relation between hard fact and mythic "lies." The speaker is looking at waves:

To those crests
 Dying hard, you have nothing to say:
 you cannot help it
 If you emerge; it is not your fault. You show: you stare
 Into the cancelling gullies, saved only by dreaming a future
 Of walking forward, in which you can always go flat
 Flat down where the shallows have fallen
 Clear: where water is shucked of all wave-law:
Lies running: runs
 In skylight, gradually cleaning, and you gaze straight into
 The whole trembling forehead of yourself
 Under you, and at your feet find your body
 No different from cloud, among the other
 See-through images, as you are flav/ingly
 Thought of,

but purely, somewhere,

Somewhere in all thought. (11-27; emphasis added)

The late style distills aspects of the early and middle periods. There are gaps to confront and cross ("where the shallows have fallen / Clear"; "you are flawingly / Thought of, / but purely"), but instead of the threateningly blank spaces between phrases, and the near-chaotic sprawl of the lines in the middle poems, there is a calmer sense of run-on movement between lines, and a more balanced feeling of lines centered on the page. As Dickey has described his late style, "Around a central bole, sometimes hidden but always present, any number of balancing units can be arranged [. . .] I hope that the experience of this central stem will be a part of the reader's hidden pleasure: that, and a sense of precariousness, of swaying" (Preface, *Falling* . . . viii). The leap across gaps has become a more subtle play between balance and precariousness:

you stare

Into the cancelling gullies, saved only by dreaming a future
Of walking forward, in which you can always go flat

The poem sways between self-destruction and afterlife, between falling and rising, gently turning or troping each into the other around a hidden center. The diction is simple and about nature, as in the early poems, but more abstract, tending toward the *metaphysical*—yet still grounded in the flat, fallen world, which it is working through to a higher freedom:

Flat down where the shallows have fallen
Clear: where water is shucked of all wave-law:
Lies running: runs

In skylight, gradually cleaning

The mixed metaphors, strange coinages, and awkward phrasing ("where water is shucked of all wave-law"; "you are flawingly / Thought of, but purely") admit that these are words working hard on the world, making it over or reconnecting to it as something meaningful, unified, vital. That waves "Dying hard [. . .] Into the cancelling gullies" can be seen as flowing on into clear, new light is an admitted lie, a "lie" than "runs" right through the fact of death and on to a precariously held image of the afterlife, one

flawingly

Thought of,

but purely, somewhere,

Somewhere in all thought.

Dickey's first inspiration to become a poet came when, on duty in Okinawa during World War Two, and standing on a hill overlooking a military graveyard, he remembered a line from a then-obscure and now-forgotten poet named Joseph Trumbell Stickney: "And all his island shivered into flowers." As Dickey explained, "I looked at the graves and I thought of Stickney's lines, and instantaneously believed that if the right wind were to blow the graves would turn to flowers; would *shiver* into flowers. As if...as if...as if the gods had loved us" ("Weather"). "Shiver" suggests the body's fearful acknowledgment of its mortality, but it is simultaneously the trope through which the poet turns death into a larger cycle of continuing life, a "whole motion." Dickey dedicated his artistic life to the pursuit of the truly creative "lie," the one that shivered

across more and more "as ifs," confronting the widest possible gaps between the fallen world and that same world, with all its flaws, re-imagined as perfection.

Next week or next year, someone will find inspiration in the lines of an increasingly obscure and now-almost-forgotten poet:

For the king's grave turns you to light.

All dark is now no more.

(40-41, "Sleeping Out at Easter," from *Into the Stone*)

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